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THE THIRD CRITICAL WAR

—OF—

OUR NATIONAL HISTORY

An address before the Ohio Commandery of the Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States, October 2, 1918.

By COMPANION GEORGE A. THAYER,
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PRINTED BY ORDER OF THE COMMANDERY,
Cincinnati, October, 1918.

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THE THIRD CRITICAL WAR OF OUR NATIONAL HISTORY.

The Autumn days in which we of the ancient fellowship of the struggle of a half century ago for the integrity of the American Union, assemble, after some months, for the renewal of our memories of that notable epoch in which it was our privilege to be actors, are invested with a profound solemnity under the shadow of a more tremendous war whose influences pervade every household, in one or another impressive form, spiritual or material, and constitute the predominant thought of every department of community interest and welfare; religion, literature, education, industry, commerce. Wherever we turn we are confronted with the grim spectre of danger unto death of most that we hold precious; so that no other subject seems worthy of thought beside this mortal world tragedy in which, to the astonished unwillingness of many of us, our nation has gradually been made a partner.

We have engaged, upon a portentous scale never before dreamed of, in a warfare for the maintenance of what we have slowly come to recognize as the same principle which drew our people into the two former great wars which constitute creative epochs of our history, and in setting forth the motives of our decision to bear a part in this world cataclysm, it seems to me profitable to indicate some of the connection of purpose and idea which makes today's contest an inevitable sequel and supplement of those two other uprisings of Americans.

The war of 1775 to 83, of separation of the thirteen feeble colonies from the mother kingdom of Great Britain, what we know in popular parlance as the American Revolution,—settled the destiny of the colonies thenceforward as an independent self-governing nation, of which there was, before our accomplished fact, no other instance on this Western Continent; while the

struggle for the life of the Union of the then thirty-four states against those in our midst who would break it asunder, determined that these United States should remain one and indivisible.

In the first case the seven years of battle were the successful trial of a novel proposition in government; viz.: that any intelligent body of people associated in a homogeneous community which had legitimate grievances against the government under which they had been born, have the right to set up a new system of laws and rulers in the place of the old system; an audacious, revolutionary proposition, to the world of that century, which then as now if it failed to win was treason and folly; if it succeeded, established a new, hitherto unknown right in the civilized earth. We made a precedent which ever since its victory we have been ready to uphold against all adversaries.

Every people which has the strength may make its own government in the face of all previous traditions; a dangerous, pernicious pretension declared most of the old world rulers.

The four years' war against the right of secession, besides that principle which chiefly engaged the two opposing armies, viz.: that the Union should be permanent and irrevocable or should be broken up at the caprice of any of its members, — in the eyes of the outside world, some of it friendly, a good deal of it hostile, constituted a test, as to whether or not a free government could withstand a severe assault of its enemies within as well as without.

In the words of Abraham Lincoln who is, next to Franklin, our typical maker of political epigrams, the question was at stake "whether any government not too strong for the liberties of the people, can be strong enough to maintain its existence in a great emergency."

Mark the two steps of the argument:

First. There can be such an institution as a well ordered self-governing republic.

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Second. That republic is capable of withstanding the most violent assault from its own midst; against divided counsels and convictions of its own citizens.

The two facts were accomplished. Our fathers of the 18th century made a new type of nation so that, to any doubter if such a feat were possible the effective answer was: ***It has been done.***

And some eighty years later their descendants proved that this new type of sovereignty, founded upon the right of every citizen to have a part in its administration, could be as strong as any of the older types; much stronger we believe than any other form, however ancient.

Now, half a century later, we have entered upon a third great war, whose distinction from the lesser intermediate contests which have enagaged our arms, is the purpose, in the words of our national spokesman, President Wilson, to vindicate for all mankind, for each and every group large enough to construct a workable system of law and order, — what we successfully demonstrated for our American people, viz.: the sacred right to choose its own form of government, with the additional assertion that no government can be permanent which does not ensure its subjects liberty to think, to grow, and to act in every field which does not trespass upon other persons' liberty.

In 1775, when these colonies ventured to set up their own national housekeeping, every important sovereign in the world, — emperor, king, sultan, or whatever might be his title, denied that we or any other group under the sun were entitled to any part in the choice of the government set over them; rulers and political systems were given by God through a few special classes of men. That contempt of freedom in government has been steadily waning; yet it persists notably with one group of central European nations, which we know as the German-Austrian alliance.

These two leaders — Germany and Austria, — deny with scorn the pretension of common, untitled subjects, to have any control over national affairs. There is no sacred right of personal

political liberty. The only right is for nations to accept meekly the strong arm which keeps them in order; and for such strong governments to dominate any other people whose conquest seems desirable. And to enforce that pretension that might alone makes the right to subdue, to enslave, or exterminate the whole populated earth, the German empire through its sovereign, the Kaiser, its statesmen, its military leaders, and its scholars, entered upon a war for which, it is now established by overwhelming evidence, it had been deliberately and elaborately preparing for some fifty years, first against one of its smallest neighbors, then against all its neighbors, with a ferocity, a defiance of all codes of morals, a cynical and brutal use of any instrumentality put into its hands by scientific progress, which has in the words of the President made it an outlaw in civilization against which every self-respecting nation must fight for its life. If that claim wins there is no law but brute might. The issue now seems simple; but for a year or more it was not so clear.

During the nearly 140 years of our national existence our government had studiously avoided any part in the wars of the old world, no matter how much the majority of our people might sympathize with one or another of the contestants. We took seriously to heart George Washington's counsel to avoid entangling foreign alliances. Seldom were those foreign policies such as concerned our country. But this time, after long, wily concealment of its aims the German empire threatened the right upon land and sea which we held to be the unalienable possession of mankind. Practically it brought the war to our doors and made our interests and safety one with Europe.

It assailed our American travellers upon the ocean, drowning them by the hundreds, and cynically announcing that they who did not wish a similar fate might stay at home. It captured our freight vessels and sunk or carried them to its own territory. It employed an army of spies in our own land to destroy property and life in the interest of its own war success. It deliberately intrigued with adjacent South American governments, notably with Mexico, to persuade them to wage war against us on our

own soil. And as its insanity increased, for it speedily lost all respect for any established principles of morality or statecraft, its leaders of public opinion; clergymen, by the hundreds, scholars of world wide fame, writers of military treatises, as well as professional politicians, announced with an egotism which is so amazing as to seem the bluster of performers in opera bouffe, that America and Americans, like the rest of mankind, were their inferiors, who were destined straightway to be put into their proper servile place and take orders from their divinely ordained superiors.

All these monstrous positions, although bluntly set forth in innumerable documents were so long concealed from the average person not conversant with literature or history or state discussion, that person whose chief reading is in newspaper headlines, that great numbers of our own citizens were unaware that anything out of the ordinary course of European wars had happened and refused to support any movement of resentment; or any attempts at preparation for defense.

It seems easy, for those to whom national action is as simple as the passage of a vote at a political convention whose proceedings are cut and dried, to go at once into warfare upon suspicion of danger. It was not easy to convince our majorities of the danger; and to engage in a war whose tremendous proportions are now just being revealed to all of us, but whose portentous possibilities were plain to the President and his counselors long before they were dreamed of by smart editors and ambitious office seekers, is an action from which responsible rulers might well shrink. But the time came a year ago, announced in the Presidents address of April 2, 1917, when there could be no longer hesitation; and the solemn sobering act has been entered upon. We are at war for the rights of democracy and humanity; against the most cruel, unscrupulous enemy that has entered the field of battle in modern centuries; an enemy from whose methods of attack in the battle field, in the rear of the battle lines upon helpless age, womanhood and childhood, and in its prison camps, no device of torment or misery is withheld.

Already more than a million of our best manly strength is on the battle line to resist this adversary; and more millions are on the way. Our solemn task is assigned us and is accepted.

I am persuaded that until the task is fully completed and our race freed entirely from the menace of a despotism which coming from the far past, reviving the temper of old centuries of tyranny, has learned nothing of what enlightened mankind has been thinking and gaining of its rights to life liberty and happiness in these last hundred years, there will be no retreat, no surrender. A high principled people cannot abandon at any brigand's summons its right to live its own life, nor can it stand idly and stolidly by and permit its fellow democracies elsewhere to be crushed. We are all, now, of one nationality, one hope, one political salvation.

Let us not make light of the prospect before us. We are not entering upon a holiday pleasuring; we have before us much sorrow, a large share in that distress which has clothed Europe and Asia with garments of tragedy, many grievous disappointments and failures of expectation. But to offset these we have such a unanimity of sentiment all over the land in accepting our great responsibility with whatever it may bring, as I think has never before characterized our nation; such carefulness and thoroughness of preparation and such discipline and painstaking in the selection of men in the ranks and in the leadership, as have never before been attempted by us; such skill and competency in the prevention of needless pain and the cure of wounds, as no nation hitherto has possessed; and, not least of all, such absence of mean, self-seeking motives of conquest, plunder, commercial jealousy, and desire of any sort of victory than that which is good for all men of all generations to come, even for the people who are now our enemies, as to constitute our part in the war as a far more genuinely holy war than all the expeditions of history which have masqueraded under that title.

And two important revelations of our national mission have come to us.

The first of these I may call home missionary duty; the second, foreign missionary duty; using both terms, not in the old fashioned theological sense, but in the meaning of instructing the world here in our own land and wherever abroad our influence can reach, in what respects our existence as a free republic means a better world.

Just as the preachers of Christianity in its various forms have announced with positiveness that they have glad tidings of great joy for all mankind; which it is their solemn obligation to proclaim wherever they can be heard; so it is forced upon us of this United States by the events of the last four years to take our political principles seriously, not as a mere accident which befell us in a corner of the earth, which a few lucky Americans won by themselves, but as a divine trust, committed to us by the struggles and failures of many generations, and many races, to be used for the education of the old world across the sea as well as for this Western Continent.

I.

As to the home mission; we have lately been awakened from a delusion and a torpor. A good many of us have taken it for granted that all of our population were loyal lovers of our republic, prizing its principles and privileges above those of any other nation. And so assuming that there was nobody among us who did not heartily share that sentiment, we did practically nothing to encourage and develop it. We believed that it was a plant that would sow its own seeds to an ever increasing harvest.

There has been very little education of the genuinely patriotic spirit, by which I mean, not the sort of noisy braggadocio to which has been satirically applied the term spread eagle talk, but a sober understanding of the features of our free government which command the honor of thoughtful students throughout the enlightened world, as one of the most hopeful and distinguished experiments in government which have ever been carried to such success.

On national holidays when boasting was lawful such as any small boy may employ in speaking of his family affairs, we have talked loudly of national greatness. But we seldom meant it to be nor was it received by our hearers other than rhetorical flourish for temporary effect. Our public school instruction has not so far as I know, been directed towards emphasizing the obligation of the citizen to the nation in any such degree as has been the foremost and incessant instruction of the arch mischief maker of this war. We have recited sounding orations of our great public speakers on festival days; but I question whether any set of pupils in school or college has been drilled in the superiority of democratic ideals to those of even the most effective monarchies, or could make a creditable presentation of reasons why this country is the real type of the government, which the future generations must prefer to every other sort. A majority among us, I fear would have given as the dominant reason why this is the most desirable nation for its citizens that material living was better here; we had more and fertile land, more enormous other resources of wealth and were less troubled in our personal convenience by laws and police.

Yet with this torpor concerning democratic ideals, there has been suddenly revealed to most of us, who were ignorant or indifferent concerning the fact, that in many states of the Union there has been carried on at the public expense, in the schools which began the teaching of our children and continued it as far as most of them went in public instruction; a systematic laudation of certain old world empires and their autocratic rulers, to the disparagement of our own national principles.

America was spoken of with a certain contempt as far behind some European country, one especially, in its standards of intelligence, happiness or religion. And the impression was sought to be made that by comparison, a wise and autocratic kingdom with the lowest practicable participation of the individual, was a safer and stronger nation than a people of popular suffrage. The common schools were being made the tools for rehabilitating

antique and out of date theories of the divinity of hereditary rulers and nobility.

Of course the most of us of thinking ability who have compared through personal experience and not by means of the safe distance of reading books, the blessings of imperial and republican political systems would take such praise of autocracy for its true worth or worthlessness, and continue to be grateful that we were free citizens of a self governing republic.

For the most of our native stock, descended from settlers of two or three centuries, there would be no delusion about the divine rights of kings. And those children of recent immigrants who were driven from their old world home by tyranny, cruelty and insult, would still retain enough memory of the grievances of their fathers not to be duped by any appeal to ancestral sentimentalism.

But we have among us large numbers who are Americans chiefly for economic reasons, not for love of liberty nor because they intelligently understand the character of our government but because ours seems the land of promise for those who have been burdened by home poverty, or for such as would like to rise in the social scale and be as respectable as other people. They have looked upon America much as several generations all over the earth within the last century have looked upon the California, Australia, Alaska and South Africa gold fields, as a sort of No Man's Land where they could enter unhindered to make their fortune and carry it back to the fatherland. America had no particular demand upon them; it was an easy country to work; talents had their reward here as they could not in an overcrowded old world, but as for its institutions, its relative position with regard to universal justice and right, they had no opinion unless a contemptuous one.

We are shaking off that insidious influence; and one potent instrumentality has done far more than any other in our history to remind all sorts of citizens, especially the rising youth, that ours is a true nation, demanding, and worthy to command,

the full reverence and loyalty of every soul upon its soil, not begging these citizens to think well of it but enjoining them, in the name of a social order which is superior to any individual right, to lay all that they are and all that they own at the feet of the goddess of American liberty, justice and law. That force is the creation of a democratic army by conscription.

Many a family is today having a new birth of consecration to the sacred service of the republic; not so much because the elders of the family have of their own motion had a change of heart if they needed it, (some of these are suddenly getting under cover of the spirit of their children which they did not create or encourage;) but because the majesty of law has laid its behests upon their sons and brothers, and the instinct of romance and adventure in these young men has been aroused, to personify the nation as a noble austere mother, who has given them life and now asks them to repay, in part, the solemn debt. War service is creating what in our placid days we seldom undertook to inculcate, in all ages and ranks of our citizenship, the deep conviction that nowhere else upon earth are there such privileges for the common person, of fair play, of respect for his personality without regard to his ancestry, of liberty for himself and his children to be and do their best, in mind and body; and from the waste of battle wlll emerge this strengthened republicanism which will allow no divided allegiance, no insolent assumption, founded upon traditional sentimentalism that somewhere else is a government superior to ours. We must make this the superior government if we find flaws in it, its weaknesses are not an essential part of it; it has the right to take the best it can find from any system, but these shall be no blind worship of foreign gods as superior because they are foreign.

II.

And we are recognizing our foreign mission to demonstrate to reasonable peoples over the sea, the conviction that, in democratic institutions is to be found the only sure protection of the dignity of human nature anywhere under the sun, the only guarantee that can be trusted for meting equal justice to every soul

of man, that free government is the only surely good government, the only law under which the future man can attain the full stature of his promise and potency, as a son of the Most High God.

President Wilson's epigram that we must make the world safe for democracy means that the old, age long struggle, which created faint dawnings of political liberty in ancient times; but which has had some of its most dramatic manifestations within a hundred and fifty years, when our republic was born and the French republic tried to be born, and other lesser peoples have rebelled against despots, is still to be carried on after this war by the masses of plain people; against the decrepit advocates of government of the strong arm, or iron and blood, and we are on the side of the plain people with all our resources.

We do not intend to force any nation to accept our political ideas; but we demand a fair hearing of the merits of popular institutions by the side of monarchical institutions, with an opportunity of free discussion and free choice of those who are to be governed. And that is the underlying purpose of our despatch of a host of strong men to the battle lines of Central Europe. We see who are friendly to our ideas and who are in implacable hostility to them; and we are ready and glad to argue our cause against all adversaries in the field of deadly combat; and may God defend the right!

And that a multitude of the brave and wise in the old world recognize our American championship of their dearest hopes and most cherished aspirations is evidenced by the growing weight which the messages of President Wilson are having with the public sentiment of our allied nations and with the statesmen who are forming the present policies of the war and looking to the safe solution of state problems when the war has come to its end. America is obtaining an influence among thoughtful and large minded men and women which it never before possessed; and which it behoves us, who hold its reputation dear to support and depend by our words, our soberest thinking and our most willing sacrifices.

And it is not the great and famous of Europe chiefly that we are making our friends and lovers. That long standing estimate of the rank and file of common people of Europe, not of the rich and powerful but of the poor and oppressed that our country was the refuge and salvation of all such as they, against the wicked and lawless, has today new and pathetic revival; our troops are their dreams become realities, their deliverers from the intolerable sorrows which burden them; and the tramp of our armed republicans is the voice of heaven, at last, long delayed, but now made real, in answer to their prayers that they may be redeemed from their body of death.

One effective utterance of this trust that God has not deserted His innocent children came in a short cable message some months ago from Paris, to the purport that the first representatives of our Republican van guard of soldiers were touched and astonished to see among the spectators of their passage, little children upon their knees in the street. The spirit of that display of childlike faith has been admirably embodied in a simple poem in which in dramatic form the children and mothers of Europe speak for the democracy of Europe, the latent but prophetic democracy.

"Why so patient standing there?
Edouard and small Pierre,
Georges, Yvette and Marie Claire?"

When the troops come marching by
(Quoth the small Pierre)
Mother wilt thou lift me high,
That we see them, thou and I?

Mother, are they fair to see?
(A busy tongue, Pierre!)
Have they little boys like me,
Left at home across the sea?
(Alas, alas, Pierre!)

Mother we have waited long,
(Long indeed, Pierre.)
The sun has grown so hot and strong,—
Surely none has done them wrong!
(God forbid, Pierre!)

Mother who did send them here?
(The gift of God, Pierre.)
But then there is no need of fear, —
And on thy cheek I see a tear,
(The tears of hope, Pierre.)

Down the boulevard a cry;
A bugle note is flung on high,
The stars and stripes are passing by!

The gift of God, quoth small Pierre;
His hat on breast, his curls all bare,
He knelt upon the pavement there.

Five young children kneeling there,
Georges, Yvette and Marie Claire,
Edouard and small Pierre.

Fairest flag of liberty
Carrying hope across the sea, —
A little child has hallowed thee,
And made of these a prayer.

IN THE MIDST OF THEM.

Margaret Bell Merrill. Scribner's, May, 1918.

Cablegram from Paris: "The Americans were greatly surprised to see a number of children kneeling in the street as the flag was carried by.

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